

An Examination of the Iranian Regime's Threats to Homeland Security

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security

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Testimony of Ambassador Nathan A. Sales

Chairman Green, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee, it is a pleasure to be here today.

My name is Nathan Sales. I am the founder and principal of Fillmore Global Strategies LLC, a consultancy that provides legal and strategic advisory services on matters at the intersection of law, policy, and diplomacy. I am also a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, a member of the advisory board at the Vandenberg Coalition, and a senior advisor at the Soufan Group.

From 2017 to 2021, I served at the U.S. Department of State as the Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism. Concurrently, I was the acting Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, as well as the Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. I previously served at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, and at the U.S. Department of Justice as Senior Counsel in the Office of Legal Policy, where I worked on counterterrorism policy. I am here as a private citizen, but my testimony is informed by my experiences working on national security and counterterrorism for the U.S. government over the course of two decades.

Today I will begin by describing the Iranian terrorist threat to the U.S. homeland; then discuss Tehran's campaign of terrorism against Israel, including Americans in Israel; and conclude with suggestions on what more can be done to better protect Americans from the specter of Iran-backed terrorism.

This hearing is taking place in the aftermath of a horrific terrorist attack on our ally Israel – an attack that has Iran's fingerprints all over it. On October 7, hordes of gunmen from Hamas – a Palestinian terrorist group that the Islamic Republic provides with money, weapons, and training – invaded southern Israel from the Gaza Strip, perpetrating horrors seemingly taken from the pages of a Cormac McCarthy novel. More than 1,400 men, women, and children were mercilessly slaughtered, and around 200 hostages were carried off into captivity, including infants and toddlers.¹ October 7 was the deadliest day in Israel's 75-year history. More than that, it was the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust. It was also a dark day for America, with 32 U.S. citizens killed and an estimated 11 missing, some of whom are being held hostage in Gaza, as of this

¹ Abbas Al Lawati et al., *Israel Is at War with Hamas. Here's What to Know*, CNN, Oct. 16, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/16/middleeast/israel-hamas-gaza-war-explained-week-2-mime-intl/index.html>.

writing.² That makes October 7 the deadliest attack on Americans by international terrorists since 9/11 and the fourth deadliest such attack in history. I look forward to discussing with the Committee what the United States should do to prevent future atrocities like these.

I.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the world's worst state sponsor of terrorism. Acting through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and numerous terrorist proxies, the regime has murdered countless innocent civilians, taken hostages remorselessly, and shed blood on an industrial scale. The threat it poses is not confined to the Middle East but extends across the entire world – including the United States.

Let me share just a few examples of the Iranian threat to the homeland.

Right now, as we speak, the Islamic Republic is actively plotting to assassinate a number of former senior U.S. officials here on American soil. Last year, the Justice Department announced charges against an IRGC member believed to be the ringleader of a plot to murder John Bolton, the former National Security Advisor. The would-be assassin reportedly also was targeting former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. These former officials and others like them now live under constant, 24-hour government protection because of the Iranian threat to their lives.³

Meanwhile, in July 2022, the Islamic Republic tried to assassinate one of the witnesses at today's hearing: Masih Alinejad, the celebrated Iranian-American human-rights activist. This brazen attempt on her life – the regime sent a gunman armed with an AK-47 to her Brooklyn home in broad daylight – came on the heels of a plot in 2021 to kidnap her in New York and render her back to Iran to face torture or execution.⁴

In August 2022, an IRGC supporter tried to murder acclaimed author Salman Rushdie at a book festival in New York State, stabbing him multiple times on stage. In a grotesque irony, Rushdie, who has been under an Iranian death sentence since the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* in the 1980s, was set to speak on the subject of America's role as an "asylum for writers and other artists in exile and as a home for freedom of creative expression."⁵ The assailant reportedly was in contact with IRGC officials before the attack.⁶ Whether or not Tehran formally tasked him with the assault is beside the point. The regime put a multi-million dollar bounty on

² 32 Americans Killed in Israel-Hamas Conflict, State Department Says, CBS News, Oct. 19, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/israel-hamas-war-palestinians-biden-speech-after-gaza-hospital-blast/>.

³ Jennifer Hansler, *US Sanctions Iranian Officials Accused of Plotting Assassinations Abroad Including Against Bolton and Pompeo*, CNN, June 1, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/01/politics/us-iran-sanctions-assassination-plots/index.html>.

⁴ Benjamin Weiser & Glenn Thrush, *Justice Dept. Announces More Arrests in Plot to Kill Iranian Writer*, N.Y. Times, Jan. 27, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/27/us/politics/masih-alinejad-doj-assassination-plot.html>.

⁵ Ginger Adams Otis, *Author Salman Rushdie Stabbed Onstage at New York Event*, Wall St. J., Aug 12, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/salman-rushdie-attacked-at-new-york-event-11660320109>.

⁶ Mitchell Prothero, *Salman Rushdie Stabbing Suspect "Had Contact With Iran's Revolutionary Guard"*, Vice News, Aug. 14, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/88qxvz/salman-rushdie-hadi-matar-revolutionary-guard>.

Rushdie's head – which was reaffirmed and even increased as recently as 2016⁷ – so it is fully responsible.

A decade earlier, in 2011, the Iranian regime attempted to assassinate Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States by bombing a popular restaurant in Washington, DC's Georgetown neighborhood. Had the plot succeeded, it could have resulted in mass casualties – not just the intended target, but countless innocent Americans who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. For Tehran, that was a feature of the operation, not a bug. Discussing the possibility of other deaths, one of the plotters reportedly stated: “They want that guy done, if the hundred go with him f**k 'em.”⁸

Critically, Iran has attempted to carry out several of these plots by exploiting vulnerabilities in our southern border. In the attempted assassination of John Bolton, Tehran planned to use a Mexican national with ties to drug cartels.⁹ It likewise attempted to use a Mexican drug cartel in the plot against the Saudi ambassador.¹⁰ There is a significant risk that Iran-backed and other terrorists might take advantage of these vulnerabilities again in the future. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection field office in San Diego recently warned that Hamas, Hezbollah, and other terrorists “may attempt travel to or from the area of hostilities in the Middle East via circuitous transit across the Southwest border.”¹¹ More broadly, CBP has reported a dramatic spike in the number of individuals on its Terrorist Screening Dataset watchlist who were apprehended crossing the southern border: zero in fiscal year 2019, three in fiscal year 2020, 15 in fiscal year 2021, 98 in fiscal year 2022, and 169 in fiscal year 2023.¹² Those are just the ones we know about. It is not implausible that other watchlisted individuals have been able to enter the country undetected.

Of course, the Iranian regime targets Americans abroad as well as at home. The IRGC was responsible for killing 603 American soldiers in Iraq, in part due to the advanced explosively

⁷ Thomas Erdbrink, *Iran's Hard-Line Press Adds to Bounty on Salman Rushdie*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/23/world/middleeast/irans-hard-line-press-adds-to-bounty-on-salman-rushdie.html>.

⁸ U.S. Dep't of Justice, *Two Men Charged in Alleged Plot to Assassinate Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States*, Oct. 11, 2011, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-men-charged-alleged-plot-assassinate-saudi-arabian-ambassador-united-states>.

⁹ Nick Schiffrin, *Iranian Man Charged for Trying to Assassinate Former National Security Adviser John Bolton*, PBS, Aug. 10, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/iranian-man-charged-for-trying-to-assassinate-former-national-security-adviser-john-bolton>.

¹⁰ Charlie Savage & Scott Shane, *Iranians Accused of a Plot to Kill Saudis' U.S. Envoy*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 11, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/us/us-accuses-iranians-of-plotting-to-kill-saudi-envoy.html>.

¹¹ Adam Shaw & Bill Melugin, *CBP Memo Sounds Alarm on Hamas, Hezbollah Fighters Potentially Using Southern Border to Enter US*, Fox News, Oct. 23, 2023, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/cbp-memo-sounds-alarm-hamas-hezbollah-fighters-potentially-using-southern-border-enter-us>.

¹² U.S. Customs and Border Protection, *CBP Enforcement Statistics Fiscal Year 2023*, Oct. 23, 2023, <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics>. The Terrorist Screening Dataset “is the U.S. government's database that contains sensitive information on terrorist identities.” It “originated as the consolidated terrorist watchlist to house information on known or suspected terrorists (KSTs) but has evolved over the last decade to include additional individuals who represent a potential threat to the United States, including known affiliates of watchlisted individuals.” *Id.*

formed penetrators (EFPs) it provided to its terror proxies in the country. That is one-sixth of all U.S. fatalities during the war in Iraq.¹³ In Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic reportedly paid Taliban fighters a \$1,000 bounty for every American soldier they killed.¹⁴

Perhaps the most potent tool in Tehran's global terror campaign is Hezbollah, the Lebanese terrorist group responsible for the 1983 attacks on the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, which killed 63 and 305, respectively.¹⁵ Today, Hezbollah is the Islamic Republic's proxy of choice for terrorist attacks on Israelis and Jews around the world. In Argentina, in March 1992, Hezbollah bombed the Israeli embassy, killing 29; two years later, in July 1994, it bombed a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, killing 85.¹⁶ In Bulgaria, in July 2012, a Hezbollah suicide bomber killed five Israeli tourists and their bus driver.¹⁷ In the past several years, the group has been caught planning attacks or stockpiling explosives in Western Europe, Latin America, the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.¹⁸

Hezbollah is also active here at home. Between 1997 and 2020, 128 suspected Hezbollah members were arrested in the United States.¹⁹ In recent years the FBI arrested three suspected Hezbollah operatives who were conducting surveillance on the Panama Canal and casing potential targets in New York City, including the Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building, Times Square, and Rockefeller Center. Two have been convicted of various terrorism-related crimes and sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while the third case remains pending.²⁰ We have to assume that

¹³ Alex Horton, *Soleimani's Legacy: The Gruesome, Advanced IEDs that Haunted U.S. Troops in Iraq*, Wash. Post, Jan 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/01/03/soleimanis-legacy-gruesome-high-tech-ieds-that-haunted-us-troops-iraq/>.

¹⁴ *Report: Iran Pays \$1,000 for Each U.S. Soldier Killed by the Taliban*, NBC News, Sept. 5, 2010, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna39014669>.

¹⁵ Matthew Levitt, *The Origins of Hezbollah*, The Atlantic, Oct. 23, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/10/the-origins-of-hezbollah/280809/>.

¹⁶ Ronen Bergman, *Mossad Sheds New Light on Argentina Terrorist Attacks in 1990s*, N.Y. Times, July 22, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/22/world/middleeast/argentina-mossad-hezbollah-bombings.html>.

¹⁷ Benjamin Weinthal, *Hezbollah Terrorists Who Killed Israelis in Bulgaria Bus Blast Get Life in Prison*, Jerusalem Post, Mar. 21, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-734936>.

¹⁸ U.S. Dep't of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2020*, Dec. 2021, at 266 [hereinafter *2020 Country Reports*], <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/>; *US Accuses Hezbollah of Storing Explosive Chemical in Europe*, AP, Sept. 17, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/italy-militant-groups-greece-terrorism-europe-8e559f3e5a2696ba8cda679c5cccb0c0>.

¹⁹ Anyssia S. Kokinos et al., *Hezbollah's Operations and Networks in the United States*, June 2022, at 4, https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Hezbollah's_Operations_and_Networks_in_the_United_States_June30_2022.pdf. See also Colin P. Clarke, *Hezbollah Has Been Active in America for Decades*, The National Interest, Aug. 26, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/hezbollah-has-been-active-america-decades-22051>.

²⁰ U.S. Dep't of Justice, *New Jersey Man Sentenced To 12 Years in Prison for Receiving Military-Type Training From Hezbollah, Marriage Fraud and Making False Statements*, May 23, 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/new-jersey-man-sentenced-12-years-prison-receiving-military-type-training-hezbollah-marriage>; U.S. Dep't of Justice, *Hizballah Operative Sentenced to 40 Years in Prison for Covert Terrorist Activities on Behalf of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization*, Dec. 3, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/hizballah-operative-sentenced-40-years-prison-covert-terrorist-activities-behalf-hizballah-s>; U.S. Dep't of Justice, *Two Men Arrested for Terrorist Activities on Behalf of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-men-arrested-terrorist-activities-behalf-hizballahs-islamic-jihad-organization>.

other Hezbollah operatives are here as well, hiding in plain sight and awaiting activation orders in the event of open conflict between Iran and the U.S. or Iran and Israel.

II.

Which brings us to the horror in Israel.

Iran is pursuing an encirclement strategy with respect to the Jewish state – surrounding it with a range of terrorist proxies to threaten its citizens and apply pressure. Hamas is just the tip of the iceberg.

To the north, in Lebanon, Iran has spent decades lavishly bankrolling Hezbollah, building a corrupt state within a state that serves Tehran's interests and impoverishes the Lebanese people. According to the U.S. State Department, the Islamic Republic has provided Hezbollah with some \$700 million a year.²¹ Hezbollah now sits on a massive arsenal of 150,000 rockets and missiles, and with Iran's help it is developing the capability to build its own precision guided munitions that could reach all of Israel's territory.²² In the northeast, in Syria, the IRGC is hard at work propping up the brutal Assad dictatorship, greatly adding to the misery of the long-suffering Syrian people. Hezbollah fighters are there, too, of course.

In the south, in Gaza, Iran-backed Hamas runs a terror statelet whose priority is not providing basic services to the Palestinian people, but devoting enormous resources to terrorism – tunnels, rockets, even incendiary kites and balloons. Extensive Iranian support in the past several years has enabled Hamas to dramatically improve its capabilities. Hamas has never wavered from the goals it announced in its founding covenant in 1988: killing Jews and destroying Israel.

“Our struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious.... The Day of Judgement will not come about,” [the covenant] proclaims, “until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him.... There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad.”²³

Hamas's neighbors in Gaza, Palestine Islamic Jihad, are also on Tehran's payroll. All told, Tehran has provided various Palestinian terrorist groups in Gaza and the West Bank with upwards of \$100 million annually, according to the State Department.²⁴ This year, Iran's support to Hamas alone has ballooned to \$350 million a year, according to Israeli security sources.²⁵ It might come as a

²¹ 2020 Country Reports at 267.

²² 2020 Country Reports at 122, 131.

²³ Quoted in Bruce Hoffman, *Understanding Hamas's Genocidal Ideology*, The Atlantic, Oct. 10, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/10/hamas-covenant-israel-attack-war-genocide/675602/>.

²⁴ 2020 Country Reports at 272-73.

²⁵ Samia Nakhoul, *How Hamas Secretly Built a "Mini-Army" to Fight Israel*, Reuters, Oct. 13, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/how-hamas-secretly-built-mini-army-fight-israel-2023-10-13/>.

surprise that Shiite Iran would bankroll Sunni terrorists like Hamas, but their shared hatred of Jews and of Israel allows them to overlook their theological differences to form an alliance of convenience.

Farther afield, in Yemen, the Iranian regime provides the Houthis with precision weapons they use to attack airports, energy infrastructure, and other civilian targets across the region while bringing the Yemeni people to the brink of famine. Lately, the Houthis have signaled that they might start targeting Israel with Iranian drones.²⁶

Why does this all matter to the United States? For several reasons. First, we have a vital national interest in ensuring that Israel, our closest ally in the region and the only democracy in the region, is secure against its many enemies – enemies that seek its extermination. When Hamas and its supporters say they want a Palestinian state “from the river to the sea” – i.e., from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea – what they are really saying is that they reject the right of Israel to exist at all. They are saying they want the region to be cleansed of Jews. Or, as you might put it in German, a Palestine that is *judenrein*.

Second, the United States and Israel have common enemies. For the Islamic Republic, Israel may be the Little Satan, but America is the Great Satan, and the Iranian terror proxies that want to slaughter Israelis want to slaughter Americans as well. Consider Hamas. The October 7 attack killed at least 32 U.S. citizens, making it the deadliest attack on Americans by international terrorists since 9/11 and the fourth deadliest such attack in history.²⁷ More Americans were killed on October 7 than in the attacks on Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996 (19 Americans killed), the USS *Cole* in 2000 (17 Americans killed), our embassy in Beirut in 1983 (17 Americans killed), or our embassies in East Africa in 1998 (12 Americans killed).

In all, Hamas has killed at least 78 Americans in at least 30 terrorist attacks stretching back to the 1990s, according to research by the Soufan Group. For example, in August 2001, Hamas terrorists bombed a Sbarro pizzeria in Jerusalem, killing 16 people, including three Americans: Malki Roth, who was just 15; Judith Shoshana Greenbaum, who was pregnant and whose unborn child also died; and Chana Nachenberg, who succumbed to her injuries this year after 22 years in a coma. The mastermind of the bombing, Ahlam Ahmad Al-Tamimi, is now living freely in Jordan, where she hosts a show on a Hamas-affiliated television channel. Tamimi is on the FBI’s list of most wanted terrorists and the U.S. Justice Department unsealed criminal charges against her in 2017 for her role in the attack.²⁸ Despite the existence of a valid extradition treaty between

²⁶ Tom O’Connor, *Iran-Backed Houthis Ready to Join War on Israel with Drones and Missiles*, Newsweek, Oct. 9, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/iran-backed-houthis-ready-join-war-israel-drones-missiles-1833221>.

²⁷ The 9/11 attacks killed nearly 3,000 Americans, followed by the 1983 bombing of the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut (241 Americans killed), and the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland (190 Americans killed).

²⁸ Raffi Berg, *Jerusalem Sbarro Pizza Bombing Victim Dies After 22 Years in Coma*, BBC News, June 1, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65754102>; Spencer S. Hsu, *U.S. Unseals Charge Against Jordanian Woman in 2001 Jerusalem Sbarro Bombing*, Wash. Post, Mar. 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/us-unseals-charge-against-jordanian-woman-in-2001-jerusalem-sbarro-bombing/2017/03/14/6b5a51f8-08f9-11e7-b77c-0047d15a24e0_story.html.

Washington and Amman, the government of Jordan has refused to extradite her to the United States to face justice for her crimes.

In July 2002, Hamas bombed a busy cafeteria at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem around lunchtime. Nine people, including five Americans – all students – were killed. Hamas claimed responsibility for the atrocity at a rally in Gaza City that was attended by 10,000 supporters.²⁹ The next year, in August 2003, a Hamas suicide bomber detonated a bomb aboard a bus in Jerusalem, killing 20, including five U.S. citizens. Three of the American victims were young children: Yitzhak Reinitz (9 years old), Tehilla Nathanson (3 years old), and Shmuel Taubenfeld (3 months old).³⁰

Let's be clear: The Islamic Republic manifestly bears responsibility for the October 7 Hamas attack. It has enlisted Hamas as a proxy in its broader terror campaign against Israel, and it has spent years providing the group with tens of millions of dollars' worth of cash, weapons, and training to enable precisely the sort of bloodshed unleashed on October 7. To be sure, Tehran's exact role in the attack remains somewhat opaque at the moment.³¹ Yet in a broader sense it doesn't matter. Whether or not Tehran "planned" or "directed" or "ordered" or "approved" the Hamas attack is hairsplitting. Tehran certainly enabled the attack, providing weapons and training in recent years that vastly improved Hamas's lethality, and it has celebrated the attack as advancing its strategic objectives. We are therefore entirely justified in holding the regime accountable for the innocent lives lost.

²⁹ *Israel Arrests Suspects in University Bombing*, CNN, Aug. 21, 2002, <https://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/08/21/mideast/>; *Seven Killed, Dozens Wounded in Bomb Blast at Israel University*, AP, Aug. 1, 2002, <https://www.poconorecord.com/story/news/2002/08/01/seven-killed-dozens-wounded-in/51073881007/>.

³⁰ *Mideast Awaits Israeli Response*, CBS News, Aug. 20, 2003, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mideast-awaits-israeli-response/>.

³¹ According to *Wall Street Journal* reporting, Iran helped plan the attack and gave the final go-ahead on October 2. Summer Said et al., *Iran Helped Plot Attack on Israel Over Several Weeks*, Wall St. J., Oct. 8, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-israel-hamas-strike-planning-bbc07b25>. Some *New York Times* sources likewise recount that "a tight circle of leaders from Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas helped plan the attack starting over a year ago, trained militants and had advanced knowledge of it," while in September the *Times* reported that Israel "had intelligence suggesting ... Iran's supreme leader had ordered a wide campaign against Israel including targeting its citizens abroad, conducting sabotage inside its borders, and smuggling sophisticated weapons to the Palestinians to ignite a civil war in the West Bank." Farnaz Fassihi & Ronen Bergman, *Hamas Attack on Israel Brings New Scrutiny of Group's Ties to Iran*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/13/world/middleeast/hamas-iran-israel-attack.html>. On the other hand, administration officials have pointed to a preliminary intelligence assessment suggesting that certain elements of the Iranian regime were surprised by the timing and scope of the attack, though they likely knew Hamas was planning attacks on Israel. Adam Entous et al., *Early Intelligence Shows Hamas Attack Surprised Iranian Leaders, U.S. Says*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/us/politics/iran-israel-gaza-hamas-us-intelligence.html>; Warren P. Strobel & Michael R. Gordon, *Iran Knew Hamas Was Planning Attacks, but Not Timing or Scale, U.S. Says*, Wall St. J., Oct. 11, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-knew-hamas-was-planning-attacks-but-not-timing-or-scale-u-s-says-d8c669f1>.

III.

What then should the United States do about October 7, and about the wider terrorist threat the Islamic Republic of Iran poses to the homeland and to Americans abroad? At a minimum, we must impose real costs on Tehran to deter terrorism, enforce sanctions to deny the regime resources for terrorism, and back Israel to the hilt.

First, the Biden administration must do more to deter Iran from plotting assassinations in our country. One might have expected the administration to insist, as a precondition for nuclear or other talks, that the regime abandon its efforts to assassinate former U.S. officials and activists. It did not. At a minimum, one might have expected the administration to obtain, as an element of the recent agreement with Tehran to exchange prisoners, an Iranian commitment to abandon its assassination plots. Again, it did not. Instead, Iran's president – Ebrahim Raisi, who has been under U.S. human rights sanctions since 2019 for his role in the regime's 1988 "death commission" that slaughtered thousands of political prisoners – has reaffirmed (on American soil, no less) the regime's intent to assassinate Americans. Here is what he said at the United Nations last month, referencing the 2020 operation to eliminate U.S.-sanctioned terrorist Qasem Soleimani:

The Islamic Republic of Iran, through all tools and capacities in order to bring to justice the perpetrators and all those who had a hand in this government sanctioned act of terror, will not sit until that is done. The blood of the oppressed will not be forgotten.³²

The Justice Department certainly deserves credit for prosecuting some of those involved in the Bolton plot. And I imagine the targets of Iran's assassination campaign appreciate the White House's promise that, "[s]hould Iran attack any of our citizens, ... Iran will face severe consequences."³³ (Of course, they might prefer for some of those consequences to be imposed now, while they are still alive, as a deterrent.)

But these efforts pale in comparison to how we responded to past attempts to kill American officials. In 1993, the United States uncovered a plot by Saddam Hussein's Iraq to assassinate former president George H.W. Bush during a trip to Kuwait. President Clinton retaliated by launching 23 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the headquarters of the Iraqi intelligence service in Baghdad. As President Clinton explained, a firm and decisive response was essential because the plot, which was "directed against a former president of the United States because of actions he took as president," was ultimately "an attack against our country and against all Americans." He continued: "We could not and have not let such action against our nation go unanswered. From the first days of our revolution, America's security has depended on the clarity of this message: Don't

³² Quoted in Farnaz Fassihi, *Iran's President Threatens U.S. Officials From the U.N. Podium, Dimming Hopes for a Rapprochement*, Seattle Times, Sept. 19, 2023, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/irans-president-threatens-u-s-officials-from-the-u-n-podium-dimming-hopes-for-a-rapprochement/>.

³³ The White House, *Statement by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Iran's Continued Targeting of U.S. Citizens*, Aug. 10, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/10/statement-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-on-irans-continued-targeting-of-u-s-citizens/>.

tread on us.”³⁴ Saddam got the message, and the scheme was abandoned. No one is calling for a military strike on Tehran, but indictments and statements are plainly inadequate to establish deterrence. Tehran should have more to fear than a sternly worded press release.

Second, the administration should resume robust sanctions enforcement to deny the Islamic Republic resources to fund terrorism around the globe. The Iranian regime is richer today than it has been in years. A great deal of attention has been paid to the \$6 billion held in South Korea that the White House agreed to unfreeze as part of a deal to release some of the American hostages held in Iran. The administration deserves credit for announcing that, in the wake of the Hamas attack on Israel, it will deny the regime access to those funds “for the foreseeable future”³⁵ – though it would be preferable to freeze the \$6 billion indefinitely, along with \$10 billion that was unfrozen in the summer of 2023 to cover energy payments from Iraq to Iran.³⁶ The bigger problem, in my view, is the fact that the regime has been able to dramatically increase its energy exports, and thus dramatically improve its economic strength, over the past several years.

As a result of crippling sanctions, by the end of the previous administration, Iran’s economy was hobbled, its coffers were drained, and its ability to project power abroad was reduced. Tehran is in a substantially stronger position today. By 2021, the regime’s accessible foreign currency reserves were down to \$4-6 billion – roughly the same as Haiti. Now, the International Monetary Fund estimates that Iran’s reserves will hit \$43 billion this year, and that was before the \$6 billion and \$10 billion were unfrozen over the summer.³⁷ Energy analysts assess that, since 2020, Iran’s oil exports have increased by a factor of four or five, with the lion’s share of sales going to China.³⁸ According to United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), a nonpartisan group that tracks Iranian energy sales, in August 2020, Iran was exporting an average of 749,000 barrels of oil per day. In August 2023, its exports were up to an average of 1,932,000 barrels per day.³⁹ In 2020, Iran sold \$12.5 billion of oil. That number jumped to \$43 billion in 2022.⁴⁰ Between January 2021 and September

³⁴ David Von Drehle & R. Jeffrey Smith, *U.S. Strikes Iraq for Plot to Kill Bush*, Wash. Post, June 27, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/iraq/timeline/062793.htm>.

³⁵ Michael Crowley & Alan Rappeport, *U.S. and Qatar Deny Iran Access to \$6 Billion From Prisoner Deal*, N.Y. Times, Oct. 12, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/12/world/middleeast/us-qatar-iran-prisoner-deal.html>. While the hostages deal provides that the \$6 billion may only be released for “humanitarian purposes,” *id.*, Iran’s president has stated that the regime will spend the money “wherever we need it.” Dan De Luce, *Iranian President Says Tehran Will Spend the \$6 Billion Released in Prisoner Exchange “Wherever We Need It”*, NBC News, Sept. 12, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iranian-president-says-tehran-will-spend-6-billion-released-prisoner-exchange-rcna104475>. Moreover, money is fungible, and if Iran now has \$6 billion to spend on food and medicine, that will free up \$6 billion to spend on guns and bombs.

³⁶ David S. Cloud & Ghassan Adnan, *Iraq Tests U.S. Sanctions with Oil-for-Gas Deal with Iran*, Wall St. J., July 14, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraq-tests-u-s-sanctions-with-oil-for-gas-deal-with-iran-c318b917>.

³⁷ *Washington Unlocks Frozen Iranian Funds*, Jewish Inst. for Nat’l Sec. of Am., June 14, 2023, at 3, https://jinsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/20230614_FrozenIranianFunds_v2-1.pdf.

³⁸ Manuel Quinones & Bob King, *Biden’s Choice: Let Iranian Oil Flow or Watch Prices Rise*, Politico, Oct. 12, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/10/12/biden-iran-oil-gas-prices-00120924>.

³⁹ United Against Nuclear Iran, *Iran Tanker Tracking*, <https://www.unitedagainstinucleariran.com/tanker-tracker>.

⁴⁰ United Against Nuclear Iran, *Analysis of Iranian Oil Sales Under President Trump vs. President Biden*, Oct. 6, 2022, <https://www.unitedagainstinucleariran.com/blog/analysis-of-iranian-oil-sales-under-president-trump-vs-president-biden>.

2022, the regime's oil sales to China alone totaled \$38 billion.⁴¹ In all, UANI estimates that Iran has been able to sell \$80 billion of oil since January 2021.⁴² \$80 billion can buy a lot of bombs.

Tehran will certainly use this windfall to support terrorism across the region, against Israel, and against the United States, and the White House should restore the economic pressure that brought Iran's economy to its knees. Terrorism sanctions work. Sanctions deny terrorists the money they need to plan and carry out attacks. As I've mentioned, for years Hezbollah could count on its patrons in Tehran to provide it with upwards of \$700 million annually, and Hamas and other Palestinian terrorists received \$100 million a year. But after the United States used sanctions to squeeze Iran's economy, the money dried up. By 2019, both groups had to adopt "austerity plans" to cope with the shortfall. Hezbollah's leader was reduced to going on TV and pleading for donations.⁴³

Third, the United States must support Israel until it achieves its goals in the war with Hamas. This is not a war that Israel sought, but it is one that it cannot afford to lose. President Biden has spoken powerfully about Israel's right to self-defense, a marked improvement over the confused messaging we initially saw from his administration. The day of the attack, the State Department's Office of Palestinian Affairs tweeted a call for "all sides to refrain from violence and retaliatory attacks" (it was quickly deleted), which was followed the next day by a tweet reporting that Secretary of State Blinken urged a "cease-fire" in a call with his Turkish counterpart (it too was quickly deleted).⁴⁴ Presumably these posts were scrubbed because higher-ups realized that standing in the way of Israeli retaliation and demanding a cease-fire would only reward Hamas and cripple Israel's ability to prevent future attacks.

Now the White House will need to put the diplomatic heft of the United States behind the president's words. Israel has articulated expansive goals for the war in Gaza – degrading Hamas to the point it is no longer capable of threatening Israel or functioning as a quasi-governmental entity, an ambitious goal that is comparable to the United States's aim of destroying al Qaeda in the aftermath of 9/11, and defeating ISIS's so-called "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria during the Obama and Trump administrations. The United States will need to ensure that Israel has the time and space it needs to accomplish its mission, pushing back against its critics at the United Nations and elsewhere when they inevitably begin to demand that Jerusalem stand down prematurely before its objectives are met.

⁴¹ Michael Crowley, *U.S. Penalizes Chinese Companies for Aiding Iran's Oil Exports*, N.Y. Times, Sept. 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/29/us/politics/iran-sanctions-china-oil.html>.

⁴² Nassim Khadem, *As Israel's War Against Hamas Escalates, US Sends a Warning to Iran, Raising Fears of a Recession*, ABC News (Australia), Oct. 12, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-13/israel-war-against-hamas-iran-oil-price-economy-global-recession/102968608>.

⁴³ Special Representative Brian H. Hook, *Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, 116th Cong., Oct. 16, 2019, at 3, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/download/hook-testimony-101619>.

⁴⁴ Katelyn Caralle, *State Department Slammed for Deleting MULTIPLE Tweets Urging Israel to Stand Down on Retaliating Against Hamas*, Daily Mail (UK), Oct. 9, 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12611231/State-Department-slammed-deleting-MULTIPLE-tweets-urging-Israel-stand-retaliating-against-Hamas.html>.

At the same time, United States must use its influence to ensure that Israel prosecutes the war in a way that causes as little harm as possible to civilians in Gaza. Heartbreaking images of human suffering have begun to emerge from the war zone and Israel – neither more nor less than any other combatant – should fully comply with law-of-war requirements designed to prevent civilian harm, as it has done in the past and has pledged to do now. We should also be clear about who bears responsibility for this suffering: Hamas, which has a long and sordid history of using Palestinian civilians as human shields; of storing weapons in and around schools, mosques, and other protected civilian infrastructure; and even of preventing Palestinian civilians from evacuating conflict zones. Hamas puts its own population at risk to further its murderous terror campaign. Its atrocities against Israelis and Jews and its cruelties to Palestinians are two sides of the same coin.

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you again. I look forward to your questions.